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ABSTRACT

Student interest prompted the formation of a Speaker's Bureau in Seminole Senior High School, Seminole, Florida. First, students compiled a list of community contacts, including civic clubs, churches, retirement villages, newspaper offices, and the County School Administration media center. A letter of introduction was composed and speaking programs selected according to public interest. Growing community support for student speaking engagements such as debates, skits, readings, and patriotic programs resulted in an enthusiastically growing speech program. Students benefited from exposure to the community, developed a bond with adults in the various groups and organizations they spoke to, and increased their confidence and poise in public speaking. (KS)

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Within The School and The Community - A Speaker's Bureau

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Within the School and the Community - A Speaker's Bureau

It began with a complaint: "I can speak here in front of the class, but in front of people, it's not the same!" That comment opened our first "brainstorming" session for a solution to obtain more exposure for the speech students before "live audiences". By the end of the period, the idea of establishing a Speaker's Bureau was on the way to becoming a reality.

Nearing the end of our third year of the Speaker's Bureau, my students and I feel that it truly was the solution for us; not only as a learning experience, but also as a means of cementing a closer bond between the community and the high school. However, many of our early obstacles and wrong turns, could have been avoided, so let's take a "run-thru" of How to Establish a Speaker's Bureau in your own secondary school.

Seminole Senior High School, in the fall of 1973, was the second largest high school in Pinellas County. Enrollment was 3400 students, on double sessions, with the 9th graders entering the high school for the first time. Seminole had never had a speech program, so with the help of the counselors, and the added incentive of an English credit granted for Speech, we began our first year with three speech classes, one semester classes only. Twenty of these first semester students signed up for a second semester, and it was in answer to their pleas of what can we do? that our brainstorming session began.

Since none of us had even the remotest idea of just how one started such a thing, we decided to make a list of all the clubs and organizations within the Seminole community.

The students would scan the newspapers on weekends for any mention of club news; they talked with their own church groups; they literally attacked every single teacher and administrative head who were members of civic groups. We decided that we would start small, within our own community, and worry about St. Petersburg and Pinellas County later!

Second, we composed a letter of introduction, listing our purposes and our reasons for beginning the Speaker's Bureau; and asking for feedback from the organizations as to their interest in such a thing as student speakers. In our enthusiasm, we didn't stop to notice that the mailing addresses for many of the men's organizations obtained from the newspapers (Rotary, Kiwanis, Civitans) had exactly the same post office addresses; so we cheerfully licked the envelopes, stole the stamps from the front office, and sent the letters on their way; being confident that soon a trail would be beaten to our door and the telephone would ring off the hook with eager groups, hungry for our programs!

Many civic organizations give only post office addresses for the District Governor or else the address of the restaurant or meeting place. All mail for branch clubs within a district will go to the same mailing address. Search out the Lt. Governor of each of these clubs, and personally explain the idea of a Speaker's Bureau to him. The students took along one of their introductory letters, and asked that it be included in the first of the month mailing to all clubs within the district, calling it to the attention of the program chairmen of each club. This method also gave the tacit approval of the Lt. Governor. Since he sent out the letter, it granted our students approval as an organization worthy of the local club's attention. A most important point when trying to get started.

Third; check with the administration in the high school. Most high schools have a standing rule that administration personnel: vice-principals, deans, counselors, registrars, will belong to different men's organizations. These people will be a big help in contacting the program chairmen or telling you whom to contact in their club for a program commitment.

A note of caution here: Don't give your letter to the administration representatives to forward for you. It puts them in the awkward position of "pushing" their own school, and acts adversely for the most part in large high schools or communities where the entire school administration belongs to only a few clubs that regularly schedule say, the music or choral programs. Do it yourself! If the program chairman is interested, he will call you.

Fourth; make sure that the teacher is available for calls during the school day or notify the switchboard of the possibility of incoming calls for the Speaker's Bureau. We made up small telephone message pads and put them beside the switchboard. These messages may be turned over to the Master of Ceremonies if the teacher doesn't wish to handle these contacts. At the beginning, I handled all calls, trying to establish relationship and good will for the students. Many older people will not deal with a student when they are calling in answer to an "unknown group" for programs.

Fifth; our second brainstorming session was held, deciding on the kinds of programs we wanted to present and could handle, according to the students and their work hours. Also, interests of the various groups who had returned our calls were taken into consideration. In beginning, only a small number of programs should be listed, with a short commentary on each program. We overwhelmed our new-found audience that first year with 200 program offerings. Our enthusiasm had carried us away!

The English Department secretaries were kind enough to run off mimeo copies of our programs. These were mailed out to every soul we could think of, or whomever had responded. Everytime we thought of another group, we mailed out another program!

Sixth; local newspapers are the greatest source of advertising. Eager for school news, small community papers will print in their entirety all articles that are offered. Within our area, these papers are the small, throw-away newspapers that end up in front yards. Articles that were okayed and proofed by the teacher/sponsor with an attached note and hand delivered by the M.C. helped to establish the Speaker Bureau name in the minds of the newspaper staff, and they passed on the information to other weekly newspapers on the Gulf Beaches.

Not knowing whom to call at the St. Petersburg Times offices, we simply picked out a byline and called the writer. This initial contact was followed up with a letter hand-delivered to the St. Pete Times concerning our program offerings. We invited the writer out to watch our students in action in rehearsals; we sent photos of their first performances; in short, we "bugged" the writer until an article finally appeared in the evening edition.

Seventh; it was at this point that such things as school permission for the students to miss classes for programs; insurance coverage and forms; transportation; scripts; formats for programs; and length of programs; became our worry level. It suddenly seemed the minor details and paper work were about to do us in! Since the students drive their own cars, insurance forms and permission slips had to be filed with the County office. Duplicate copies were retained by the teacher. We planned all student performances around a thirty minute time period, since the majority of our organizations that first year were ones that met at noon.

Contacts made through the faculty were the first to come through for us; then the church groups that the students were members of. Word of mouth spread from one organization to another, as many people who heard the students were members of several different organizations.

The sight of students constantly leaving school for another performance made the entire school aware that the Speaker's Bureau was an active organization. It certainly didn't hurt us any in announcing over the morning announcements that the Speaker's Bureau would assemble at such and such a time for their speaking engagement!

Benefits and rewards for the students have been hundredfold: teachers from other disciplines schedule the students for programs in their classes; Speaker's Bureau students were recently called upon by the County Administration to speak to local groups on the school bond issue; swing debates with our local legislative representatives have drawn large crowds; community support for the students for special trips has opened new avenues for the students to make the transition from the classroom to the business world less frightening.

For the sponsor of such a group, the growth, confidence and poise of the students; and the understanding and support of the community for these leaders of tomorrow, makes being a speech teacher a rich and rewarding life.

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Establishing a Speaker's Bureau

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Step I: Sources

1. Compile a list of all civic clubs and organizations within community. Most churches also have groups that are interested in student programs for special religious holidays.
2. Retirement villages, mobile home parks, and apartment complexes are also good prospects.
3. Local newspaper offices usually have listings of various "contact" people for club news items.
4. County School Administration's media centers are also excellent contacts.

Step II: Letters of Introduction

1. Compose letter of introduction, listing purposes for organizing a Speaker's Bureau.
2. Include a short form questionaire and telephone number for feedback on interest of club or organization in student speakers.
3. Follow up letters with telephone calls and/or personal contact with group's program chairmen.
4. Contact school newspapers, local community newspapers if available for publicity concerning the establishment of the Speaker's Bureau.

Step III: Selection of Programs

1. Using feedback from telephone calls and personal contacts, provide a variety of program combinations that will fit a thirty minute program.
2. Swing debates on current local issues, short skits, interpretative readings, patriotic programs are good selections.
3. Compile a brochure listing the offerings and a short description of each program.
4. Mail to the program chairmen of each organization early in fall of each year.

Step IV: School Clearances

1. Secure a parental permission slip for each student who will be participating during the year. These should be kept on file by the sponsor.
2. Have student drivers fill out insurance forms through the activities directors to be filed with County Administration.
3. Keep close check with school counselors and teachers to make sure participants are maintaining grade averages in all classes.

Step V: Procedures for Scheduling Programs

1. Mail confirmation letters to each club or organization as soon as a program is scheduled.
2. Ask that organization call one week in advance of program to reconfirm.

Pitfalls To Avoid

1. Be sure to set price per carload of students in advance.
2. Watch over-scheduling of students for too many programs in a month's time.
3. Assign two students as master of ceremonies so as to allow for illness.
4. Check school calendar before accepting a program to make sure students do not have conflicts.

Benefits

The students have benefited from exposure to the community and developed a close bond with many new friends among the adults in the various organizations and groups they have spoken to. After three years we have presented over two hundred programs; have a loyal band of followers who sign up six months in advance; have increased our speech classes from two to eight; and have made the Speaker's Bureau an established institution in Pinellas County, supported by an enthusiastic community.